

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**Form Approved**
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 14-04-2010		2. REPORT TYPE Master of Military Studies Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) September 2009 - April 2010	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Military Strategy, 1861-1865				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJOR DAVID E. WEST JR, ARMY NATIONAL GUARD				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES N/A					
14. ABSTRACT Jefferson Davis initially favored a strategy of defense suggestive of General George Washington during the American Revolution. However, by dispersing his forces in an attempt to defend the whole Confederacy he negated this strategic model. General Lee assumed an offensive strategy in the Virginia theater and was successful in winning battles but ultimately could not sustain his casualties and never had enough men to destroy a Union army in the field, which was his intent. Davis applied no national strategic design to military operations except to garrison troops about the Confederacy in the various departments he organized. Wavering between a true application of his Washingtonian strategy and an aggressive strategy such as General Lee's was the worst thing Davis could have done. Indecision offered the worst of any strategic design to include casualties that could not be replaced, loss of territory and logistics, and an enemy that was not destroyed on the field of battle but allowed to reset and reconstitute and continue the fight.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Confederate national military strategy Baron Henri Jomini Napoleonic system of battlefield victory					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 33	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Marine Corps University / Command and Staff College
a. REPORT Unclass	b. ABSTRACT Unclass	c. THIS PAGE Unclass			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) 703-784-3330/1120

United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Military Strategy, 1861-1865

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJOR DAVID E. WEST JR, ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

AY 09-10

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: CHARLES D. MCKENNA
Approved: Charles D. McKenna, Ph.D.
Date: 14 APRIL 2010

Oral Defense Committee Member: Mark Jacobsen
Approved: Mark Jacobsen
Date: 14 April 2010

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am truly thankful and humbled to have been blessed by God and His son Jesus Christ with a wonderful wife, Tiffany, and two fine sons, Trey and Caleb. They have always provided me unwavering support and I, their husband and father, am devoted to them. I would like to thank Doctor Charles D. (Doug) McKenna, Dean of Academics at the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, for his patience and wonderful assistance in writing this paper. I would also like to thank a tremendous historian, Doctor Mark H. Jacobsen, for his help early on in getting me started.

Executive Summary

Title: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Military Strategy, 1861-1865.

Author: MAJ David E. West Jr., United States Army National Guard

Thesis: As Commander-in-Chief, President Jefferson Davis failed to craft a viable national military strategy for the Confederate States of America.

Discussion: Davis' policies showed that, in the circumstances facing the Confederacy, on the whole he believed the best strategy would be a defensive one reminiscent of George Washington's in the Revolutionary War. In one important regard, however, the Confederacy was incapable of duplicating Washington's strategy. Faced with the ability of British sea power to deposit hostile forces anywhere on the coast, Washington had resisted demands that he disperse his army along the coast. He kept the Continental Army concentrated, and left most of the coastal areas to defend themselves as best they could. Jefferson Davis wilted under political pressures and expediencies and scattered his limited forces to at least make an effort to defend all of the vast Confederacy. The pressures upon him to disperse his armies were greater than those which George Washington had borne and Davis succumbed despite the error of doing so. In reality Davis did not and would not have a national military strategy, much less a viable one. No formal war planning directorate ever existed in Richmond. On occasion, President Davis discussed larger strategic issues with his cabinet, but its membership was too transient and its deliberations too ponderous to achieve an overall vision. Smaller groups sometimes coalesced to mull over strategy. Unfortunately, their discussions were not well recorded. Depending upon their assignments and relationship with Davis, cabinet members, politicians, and generals drifted in and out of informal sessions. Useful documentation about Confederate strategic thinking is sometimes found in correspondence between Richmond officials, especially Davis and field commanders, although such correspondence typically dealt with immediate crises and only rarely reflected a long-term view. No comprehensive offensive or defensive plan for Confederate armies is found in the historical record.

Conclusion: Jefferson Davis initially favored a strategy of defense suggestive of General George Washington during the American Revolution. However, by dispersing his forces in an attempt to defend the whole Confederacy he negated this strategic model. General Lee executed an offensive strategy in the Virginia theater and was successful in winning battles but ultimately could not sustain his casualties and never had enough men to destroy a Union army in the field, which was his intent. Davis applied no national strategic design to military operations except to garrison troops about the Confederacy in the various departments he organized. Wavering between a true application of Washingtonian strategy and an aggressive strategy such as General Lee's was the worst thing Davis could have done. Indecision created the worst of any strategic design, to include casualties that could not be replaced, loss of territory and logistics, and an enemy that was not destroyed on the field of battle but allowed to reconstitute and continue the fight.

Armed conflict broke out between the Northern and Southern states of the Union on 12 April 1861 at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, and ended with the surrender of General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox on 9 April 1865 and of General Joseph E. Johnston at Greensboro, North Carolina on 26 April 1865. More than 2,200 battles and over 6,800 engagements of all kinds were fought. The war was precipitated by the determination of seven Southern states to withdraw from the Union due to their opposition to anti-slavery and other policies of the North. South Carolina was the first to pass an ordinance of secession on 20 December 1860. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas followed in said order, the last on 1 February 1861. On 4 February 1861 delegates of the seceded states met at Montgomery, Alabama, and on 8 February 1861 formed a provisional government called the Confederate States of America. Jefferson Davis of Mississippi was elected president on 9 February 1861. After the fall of Fort Sumter on 14 April 1861 Virginia seceded rather than join in coercing the Southern states to remain in the Union, and Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina followed. The populations of the border states of Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri were divided in their loyalty but were held in the Union, partly by force. West Virginia seceded from Virginia and formed a state government which was recognized by United States President Abraham Lincoln on 26 June 1861. Richmond, Virginia, became the Confederate capital. The North summoned 2,800,000 men to the colors; 67,058 were killed in action, 43,012 died of wounds, and 224,586 of disease. The total Confederate enrollment was estimated at over 600,000 men. Southern casualties show that about 74,525 were killed and that 59,930 died of disease.¹ These numbers of fighting men and war related deaths are best estimates and not ironclad. For example, the number of men

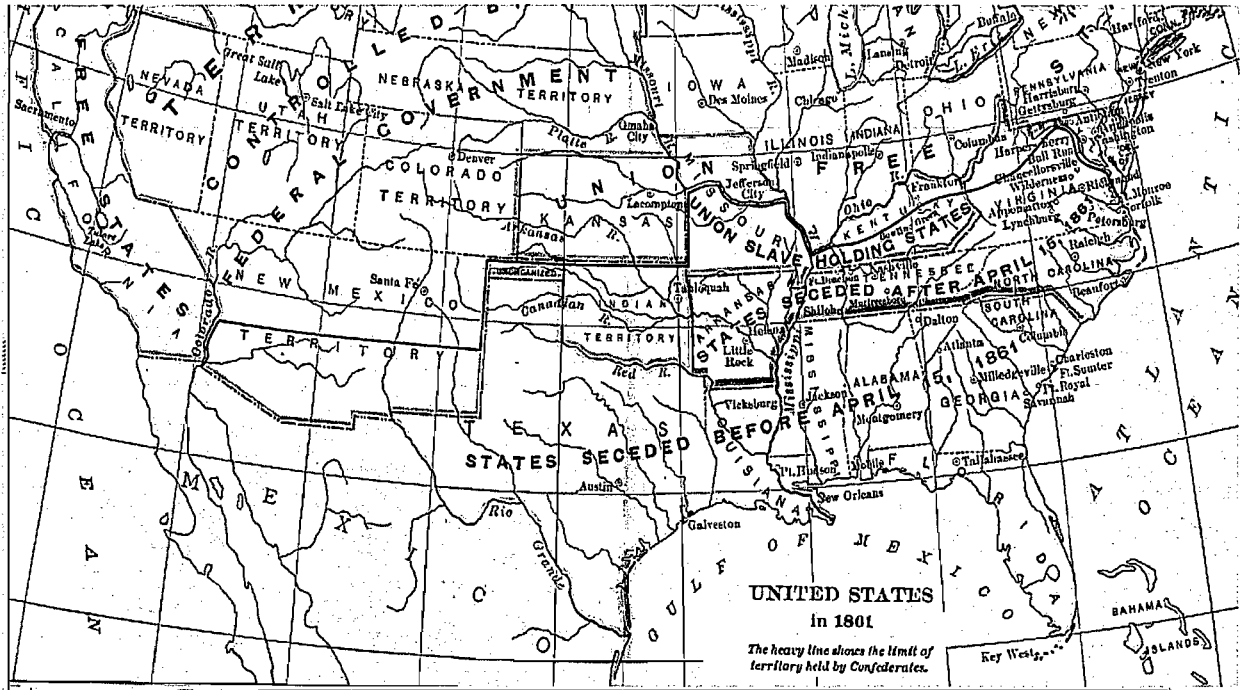
who served in Union forces was reported by the Commissioner of Pensions in 1903 as 2,213,363. Of these, 84,415 served in the Navy. The number of enlistments on the Northern side, based on the reports of the Provost Marshal General, was 2,898,304; this was believed to include militia and short-term men, not all of whom were mustered into the United States Army, as well as re-enlistments. The number in the ranks of Confederate forces cannot be stated exactly because of lack of detailed records; informal estimates run from 600,000 to 900,000. By one account, the total number of deaths on the Union side is given officially as 364,501; on the Confederate side the estimate, in the absence of complete reports, is 133,821.² Higher numbers of deaths have been estimated, as many as 360,000 Federals and 260,000 Confederates.³

During this great American Civil War, or War Between the States, the Confederacy struggled to secure its independence through force of arms. Years of sectional differences based on political and economic issues had become so volatile that a peaceful resolution of differences had been lost. The matter would be settled through unprecedented violence, death, and destruction. The Confederacy lost the war, but this was not a foregone conclusion at its beginning, and so begs the question as to what constituted Confederate strategic design. As Commander-in-Chief, President Jefferson Davis failed to craft a viable national military strategy for the Confederate States of America.

The military undertaking that lay before the government of the United States in 1861 was somewhat similar to that which faced the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1775: to reassert its authority over a vast territorial empire, far too extensive to be completely occupied or thoroughly patrolled, with a scarcity of strategically decisive types of

objectives whose seizure could produce disproportionate economic, political, or moral results. In both instances the rebels began their war in substantial control of their territory and needed only to conduct a successful defense of what they already held in order to win. The established governments had to accomplish the much more difficult feat of conquest. In both instances this task was somewhat hampered, or at least complicated, by the goal of re-unification and securing the desired renewal of political allegiance through force. In both instances the established governments could find relief at least for some of their disadvantages in their possession of sea power, which could deny the rebels relief from the outside world. However, the United States in 1861 enjoyed the advantage of much more complete control of the seas which lapped at Confederate shores than the British had held in the Revolutionary War. This mastery of the seas sprang partly from another and obvious asset of the United States in 1861 not possessed by the British in the earlier conflict, namely, proximity to areas of rebel power. The Confederacy was dangerously situated, with armies inferior in size and equipment facing an enemy whose potential military superiority was far greater than anything yet realized, and with no Confederate navy to speak of although both the rivers of the Mississippi system in the West and coastal estuaries in the East made the Confederacy vulnerable to deep penetration by Union naval power. If the Confederacy was to make at least an appearance of a defense of its 750,000 square miles of land and 3,500 miles of sea coast it was bound to be weak not only at a few points but at many places. Sooner or later the Union would probably attempt to apply pressure all along the line and then sections of the Confederate defenses were bound to collapse.⁴ The dilemma of the Confederacy was that, if the limited forces were scattered thinly in the defense then

Union forces were almost certain to apply superior strength for a breakthrough somewhere, and the effort to hold everything would end by holding nothing.⁵ Map A⁶ illustrates the territorial expanse of the newly formed Confederacy.



Map A

The man who would have to deal with this dilemma and try to figure out how to secure his country's independence was Confederate President Jefferson Davis. When the war began in 1861, the Confederacy seemed to hold one very definite advantage over the Union, its Commander-in-Chief. A graduate of West Point and commander of a regiment in the Mexican War, in 1861 Jefferson Davis had led more men in combat than most generals on either side. Additionally, he compiled a distinguished record in the House of Representatives and Senate and served as Secretary of War under Franklin Pierce. His

military and political records were matched by few men in the country when war broke out.⁷

Jefferson Davis was born in Kentucky on 3 June 1808 and was the tenth and last child of his parents. By 1810 they had relocated to the Mississippi Territory. Davis' young life was spent on a farm verging on the edge of the American wilderness. His parents were loving; his older siblings, and particularly certain slaves, doted on him.⁸ His father, Samuel Davis, became a cotton farmer and the family began to prosper. Since there were few good schools in Mississippi, Samuel decided to send Jefferson to Kentucky when he was old enough to attend school. At the age of eight, he enrolled him at Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Catholic school run by Dominican priests. Davis was the youngest student at the school, and the only Protestant. Davis attended Saint Thomas for two years until his mother could convince his father to allow him to attend a local school in Mississippi. Davis returned home alone on a steamboat at the age of ten. Back in Mississippi, Davis briefly attended Jefferson College near Natchez before entering Wilkinson Academy. While at Wilkinson Academy, Davis decided to drop out of school. Davis's father did not force him to return to school, but instead put him to work in the fields. Davis decided on his own that school had its merits and returned to Wilkinson.⁹ In 1823 at the age of fifteen Davis enrolled in Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. This was one of the best schools in the country at the time, with a law school, medical school, and a larger enrollment than Harvard. The student body here generally came from aristocratic and wealthy families from all over the South and this probably had some influence on Davis. Davis' father died on 4 July 1824 and three days later Davis sent Secretary of War John C. Calhoun an acceptance of an appointment as a cadet at the United States

Military Academy. Unknown to him, his father and brother Joseph had obtained an appointment for him at West Point. Davis had never expressed a desire to attend West Point or to join the military; he planned to graduate from Transylvania and attend law school at the University of Virginia. He would have refused the appointment, but his brother convinced him to try West Point for a year. After that, he could leave and enroll at the University of Virginia if he still desired.¹⁰

Davis entered West Point on 30 September 1824 at the age of seventeen. Here he first met some of the men who later held key roles in the Confederate Army: Albert Sidney Johnston, Leonidas Polk, and later Robert E. Lee and Joseph Johnston. Davis was not a model cadet at West Point. He was arrested and court-martialed his first year for being in Benny Havens tavern. He was sentenced to dismissal, but the court recommended exoneration due to his previous good conduct. Davis was arrested again on Christmas Eve, 1826, for attending an eggnog party. There was a riot after the party by a group of cadets against the officers, but Davis was not part of this. For attending the party, he was confined to his quarters until 8 February. He also accumulated an impressive amount of demerits, including such offenses as: visiting during study hours, having long hair at inspection, failing to keep his room in order, spitting on the floor, absence from reveille, absence from class, making unnecessary noise during study hours, and firing his musket from the window.¹¹

Davis graduated West Point on 1 July 1828 ranked twenty-three of thirty-three cadets. This standing placed him in the infantry. His first assignment was to Fort Winnebago in the Wisconsin Territory. His next assignment was at Camp Jackson (soon renamed Fort Gibson) in the Oklahoma Territory. There Davis managed to meet and fall in love with

Sarah Knox Taylor, the daughter of Zachary Taylor, his commanding officer. On 2 March 1835 Davis resigned his military commission, having decided to give up his military career in order to become a cotton planter. He and Sarah Knox Taylor were married on 17 June 1835. However, while on a honeymoon in Mississippi both newlyweds contracted either yellow fever or malaria: she died of it on 15 September 1835. Davis was left to suffer occasional residual ailments for the rest of his life.¹²

Davis was devastated by this loss and he remained at a brother's plantation for seven years. Politics gradually drew Davis out of seclusion in 1842. He became an active Democrat and ran for the Lower House of the Mississippi Legislature. He lost the election, but remained politically active. He was a presidential elector at large for Mississippi in the election of 1844 and campaigned extensively for James Polk. The Democrats nominated him for Congress in 1845 and he was elected to the House of Representatives. He served only a few months before resigning to serve in the Mexican War, but became known as an ardent expansionist, supporting the expansion into Oregon, California, and Texas. Against his second wife Varina Howell Davis' wishes he volunteered to serve in the Mississippi militia. He was elected Colonel of the First Mississippi Rifles, a volunteer regiment of gentlemen warriors looking for adventure. These were men much like Davis himself; mostly wealthy men who brought their slaves with them, and rode into battle wearing red shirts, white pants, and black hats. They were, however, excellent marksmen, and Davis ensured they were outfitted with the latest in percussion rifles. He was a stern disciplinarian, but his men were devoted to him. He first led them in action under his former father-in-law, General Zachary Taylor, at the Battle of Monterey. Davis and the First Mississippi Rifles were involved in the storming

of Fort Teneria and Fort Diablo. Davis' most famous moment came at the Battle of Buena Vista. Santa Anna faced General Taylor with a four to one superiority, demanding surrender. When Taylor refused, Santa Anna attacked, and Taylor's left flank began to give way. Taylor ordered Davis to attack. Davis, who had been wounded in the foot earlier, rallied his men and some volunteers from Indiana who had broken earlier and stopped the attacking Mexicans. When the enemy cavalry attacked again, he arranged his men into a "V" formation, with the open end facing the enemy. The Mexicans rode into the formation, and Davis's men destroyed them. He would later be criticized for the "V" formation, but regardless of the tactical merits of his performance, he showed incredible bravery and leadership in the face of a greatly superior enemy force. He was justly proud of the performance of his regiment and took great insult to any slight directed at him or his tactics.¹³

Davis returned to Mississippi to a hero's welcome. In August of 1847 Davis was appointed by the governor of Mississippi to serve out the term of the late Senator Jesse Spreight. In January of 1848 the Mississippi state legislature unanimously elected him to a full term of his own.¹⁴ Davis served as Chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, and became a vocal defender of the Southern states and slavery. Davis stated several times in the Senate that he did not believe slavery was a permanent institution but it was something to prepare the black race for eventual civil liberties. However, he deeply resented the North, especially New England, meddling in the affairs of the southern states. In September of 1851 Davis resigned his seat in the Senate to run for governor of Mississippi. He preferred to remain in the Senate, but the Democrats convinced him to run to prevent Mississippi from accepting the Compromise of 1850.

Davis lost a close election, and later was accused of being a secessionist by his opponent. Davis returned to his home in Mississippi for fifteen months before returning to politics. He was offered the position of Secretary of War by President Franklin Pierce on inauguration day. He served for Pierce's entire term and was considered a very successful Secretary. He urged fewer forts and larger detachments for the frontier soldiers. He went to Congress to increase pay, accelerate promotions, and provide pensions for widows and orphans. In 1855 he sent a commission, including then Lieutenant George McClellan, to Europe to study the Crimean War. He also promoted government weapon manufacturing instead of reliance on private companies.

At the end of Pierce's term of office the Mississippi legislature again elected Davis to the Senate, and he entered the day after Pierce left office in 1857. He became one of the more vocal defenders of the Southern states, joining in the heated debates in Congress during this period. Although completely opposed to any interference from the northern states, Davis was not among those favoring a quick secession after Lincoln's election. However, when Mississippi seceded, Davis left the Senate defending his state with one last long and eloquent speech. In his farewell he began by reminding Senators that he had always believed the sovereignty of a state gave it the right of secession. He reaffirmed his own commitment to his state by emphasizing his allegiance to Mississippi. He went on to say that the principles of the Declaration of Independence do not reference slaves and the forefathers affirmed this by charging George III with attempting to cause insurrection among the slaves. They also provided for the slaves as property in the Constitution, and considered them equal to only three-fifths of a free man when determining the number of representatives a state could have. He concluded by saying

the Government and the principles on which it was founded had been distorted, and while this forced Mississippi to declare independence, he wished for peaceful relations.¹⁵

There are three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. Strategic is the highest level. Military strategy must be determined by civil-military interaction at the highest levels and gives overall direction to the nation's war effort. Carl von Clausewitz defined strategy as "the use of engagements for the object of the war."¹⁶ The Commander-in-Chief is responsible for the overall military strategy in times of war. Clausewitz also said: "We argue that a commander-in-chief must also be a statesman, but he must not cease to be a general. On the one hand, he is aware of the entire political situation; on the other, he knows exactly how much he can achieve with the means at his disposal."¹⁷ President Jefferson Davis was Commander-in-Chief of Confederate forces and was thus ultimately responsible for Confederate national military strategy during the American Civil War. Numerous military developments influenced this war including the French Revolution and Napoleon, the interpretation made of these developments by the military historian and theorist, Baron Henri Jomini, the West Point curriculum through which most of the higher commanders passed, and combat experience in the recent war with Mexico.¹⁸ The wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon had popular appeal due to their proximity in time to the American Civil War. In addition to the history of the campaigns, readers could find military writers who explained the principles underlying Napoleon's success. The most prominent of these was Jomini. Napoleonic strategy depended on rapid maneuvers with armies dispersing to move quickly or to find, confuse, or engage the enemy; the armies concentrated to fight. From dispersal to cover a wide area or to deceive the enemy, Napoleonic strategy used concentration to bring superior

force against the enemy. If a general found his adversary divided, he would try to concentrate most of his men against one part. The other basic Napoleonic maneuver occurred when a general succeeded in taking all or part of his army into the enemy's rear.¹⁹ Jomini's short definition of strategy was "the art of making war upon the map, and comprehends the whole theater of operations."²⁰ Baron de Jomini also said this in regards to strategy:

The new inventions of the last twenty years seem to threaten a great revolution in army organization, armament, and tactics. Strategy alone will remain unaltered, with its principles the same as under the Scipios and Caesars, Frederick and Napoleon, since they are independent of the nature of the arms and the organization of the troops.²¹

He also laid out his fundamental principle of war, embraced in the following maxims:

1. To throw by strategic movements the mass of an army, successively, upon the decisive points of a theater of war, and also upon the communications of the enemy as much as possible without compromising one's own.
2. To maneuver to engage fractions of the hostile army with the bulk of one's forces.
3. On the battlefield, to throw the mass of the forces upon the decisive point, or upon that portion of the hostile line which it is of the first importance to overthrow.
4. To so arrange that these masses shall not only be thrown upon the decisive point, but that they shall engage at the proper times and with energy.²²

Jomini also spoke to the offensive and defensive:

Every army which maintains a strictly defensive attitude must, if attacked, be at last driven from its position; whilst by profiting by all the advantages of the defensive system, and holding itself ready to take the offensive when occasion offers, it may hope for the greatest success. A general who stands motionless to receive his enemy, keeping strictly on the defensive, may fight ever so bravely, but he must give way when properly attacked. It is not so, however, with a general who indeed waits to receive his enemy, but with the determination to fall upon him offensively at the proper moment, to wrest from him and transfer to his own troops the moral effect always produced by an onward movement when coupled with the certainty of throwing the main strength into the action at the most important point – a thing altogether impossible when keeping strictly on the defensive. In fact, a general who occupies a well chosen position, where his movements are free, has the advantage of observing the enemy's approach; his forces, previously arranged in a suitable manner upon the position, aided by batteries placed so as to produce the greatest effect, may make the enemy pay very dearly for his advance over the space separating the two armies; and when the assailant, after suffering severely, finds himself strongly assailed at the moment when the victory seemed to be in his hands, the advantage will, in all probability, be his no longer, for the moral effect of such a counterattack upon the part of an adversary supposed to be beaten is certainly enough to stagger the boldest troops.²³

A number of officers had read the writings of Jomini. All West Point graduates had absorbed Jominian principles from the courses of Dennis Hart Mahan, who taught at the military academy for nearly half a century. Henry W. Halleck's *Elements of Military Art and Science* (1846), essentially a translation of Jomini, was used as a textbook at West Point.²⁴

Davis' fundamental strategy for the war was defensive – the South lacked the men and resources to wage an offensive war, and his political position was that the South wished only to be left alone by the North. He excused his defensive policy on the grounds of the numerical weakness of the Confederate army and its lack of arms. Davis claimed not to have chosen a defensive policy, but that it was dictated to him by lack of means.²⁵ The Northern states had a population advantage of five to two over the Confederacy – and that is counting slaves as part of the Confederate population. The value of real and personal property in the states remaining in the Union was three times that in the Confederate states. More importantly, the value of Union manufacturing – as the two sides prepared to fight one of the first industrial wars – was more than ten times greater than that of the Confederacy. And the list can go on – comparative banking facilities, the railroad network, value of food crops, and so on.²⁶ Davis' policies showed that in the circumstances facing the Confederacy, on the whole he believed the best strategy would be a defensive strategy reminiscent of George Washington's in the similar circumstances of the Revolutionary War; if possible a strategy as sparing of manpower as Washington's. In one important regard, however, the Confederacy was incapable of duplicating Washington's strategy. Faced with the ability of British sea power to deposit hostile forces anywhere on the rebellious coast, Washington had resisted demands that he

disperse his army along the coast. He kept the Continental Army concentrated, and left most of the coastal areas to defend themselves as best they could with their own fortifications and their own militia. But no part of the Confederacy's frontiers, except possibly parts of the trans-Mississippi West, was so undeveloped and so lacking in political influence that President Davis could afford to disregard the central government's responsibilities for local defense and not feel great political pressure. Their states' rights sentiments notwithstanding, the Southern people had grown accustomed to a government with greater resources than any individual state possessed and which would bear the main burden of military defense; they would not accept less military protection from the new government in Richmond than they had received from the old government in Washington, D.C. Therefore, Jefferson Davis faced enormous political pressures to scatter the Confederacy's limited forces to at least make an effort at the defense of the whole of the vast Confederacy. The pressures upon him to disperse his armies were greater than those which George Washington had borne and Davis succumbed despite the error of doing so.²⁷

The departmental system was created by the Confederate government in 1861 as a means to organize and to administer military forces within every inch of southern terrain. In theory, each military department was to be commanded by a general officer, and was to possess what was sometimes optimistically labeled an army. Departments were charged with the responsibility of defense of a specific, designated war zone. Also, in some cases, departments were delegated additional specific tasks which were often delegated in turn to subdivisions of departments known as districts or subdistricts. For example, in October of 1861, the District of Alabama, a unit of the Department of

Alabama and West Florida, was chiefly responsible for the defense of Mobile. Another loosely organized district within that department, known only as the Army of Pensacola, defended Pensacola harbor. Likewise, the Department of Southwestern Virginia was created in the spring of 1862 chiefly to safeguard the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad and the salt and lead production areas north of Abingdon. President Davis' theory of departmental organization granted considerable autonomy to each commander. The department commander was responsible for offensive and defensive planning within his jurisdiction. He was usually the final voice in any prospective reinforcement of another department, or in any cooperative effort with another department. By the use of such a system, the government hoped to deal with the large area of the Confederacy. The matter of size was a serious concern, and there seemed a danger in 1861 that the South was too large to manage. The state of Georgia alone was larger in area than the combined states of Vermont, Rhode Island, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maryland, Connecticut, and Delaware. In early 1864 General Leonidas Polk, who commanded the Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana, was responsible for an area larger than the combined countries of Austria, Hungary, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

In 1861 the Confederate rail system seemed inadequate to bind together such vast territory. Texas and Florida possessed no rail connections with neighboring states, while there were few joining Louisiana and Arkansas with states east of the Mississippi River. In 1861 the theater between the Mississippi River and the Appalachians had only two east-west rail lines. When General Albert Sidney Johnston's small army lay on a long defensive line stretching four hundred miles from the Mississippi to the Unaka Mountains (a mountain range on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina), the nearest railroad

which joined his flanks was the Memphis and Charleston – two hundred miles southward in northern Alabama. With the loss of that line in early 1862, the Western Department was thrown back to the only alternate route, a meandering line which ran from the Great Smoky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico and then northwest to the Mississippi Delta, via Atlanta, Montgomery, and Mobile.²⁸

The departmental system and dispersion of troops, many in the static defense, was not appropriate to the defense of the Confederacy. Departments and their subdivisions came and went. These departments inhibited grand strategic design on a national level because resources and command authority were not unified. For example, on 9 April 1865 General Robert E. Lee surrendered the remains of the Army of Northern Virginia. In this act, some 27,800 Confederates received their paroles. Two weeks later General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered approximately 31,200 men of the Army of Tennessee. This deterioration of numbers in the South's two main field armies in 1865 has sometimes been cited as an example of the Confederacy's total defeat. Yet there had been many other surrenders. Beyond the Mississippi River, General E. Kirby Smith's Trans-Mississippi Department possessed 60,000 troops in March of 1865. In May, General Richard Taylor of the Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana surrendered his department at Mobile. In Taylor's force alone, 42,293 men were paroled. This does not even include several thousand additional men surrendered in the mid-South that same month. By November of 1865 the War Department had reported that 174,233 Confederate troops had been surrendered and paroled. Of this number, only 59,048 belonged to the main war effort in 1865, the armies of Lee and Johnston. The figure 174,233 itself is conservative, for it did not include many who deserted prior to official

surrender. For example, even though Kirby Smith's muster rolls in March reported 60,000 men, he actually surrendered fewer than half this number. In short, there were probably well over 200,000 southerners under arms in April of 1865 and fewer than one third of these were engaged against Sherman and Grant.²⁹ Napoleonic concentration of 200,000 troops, exploiting railroad and telegraph, at the very least may have extended the war and created other opportunities for the Confederacy.

Clausewitz stated "There is only one means in war: combat."³⁰ Clausewitz goes on to say the following:

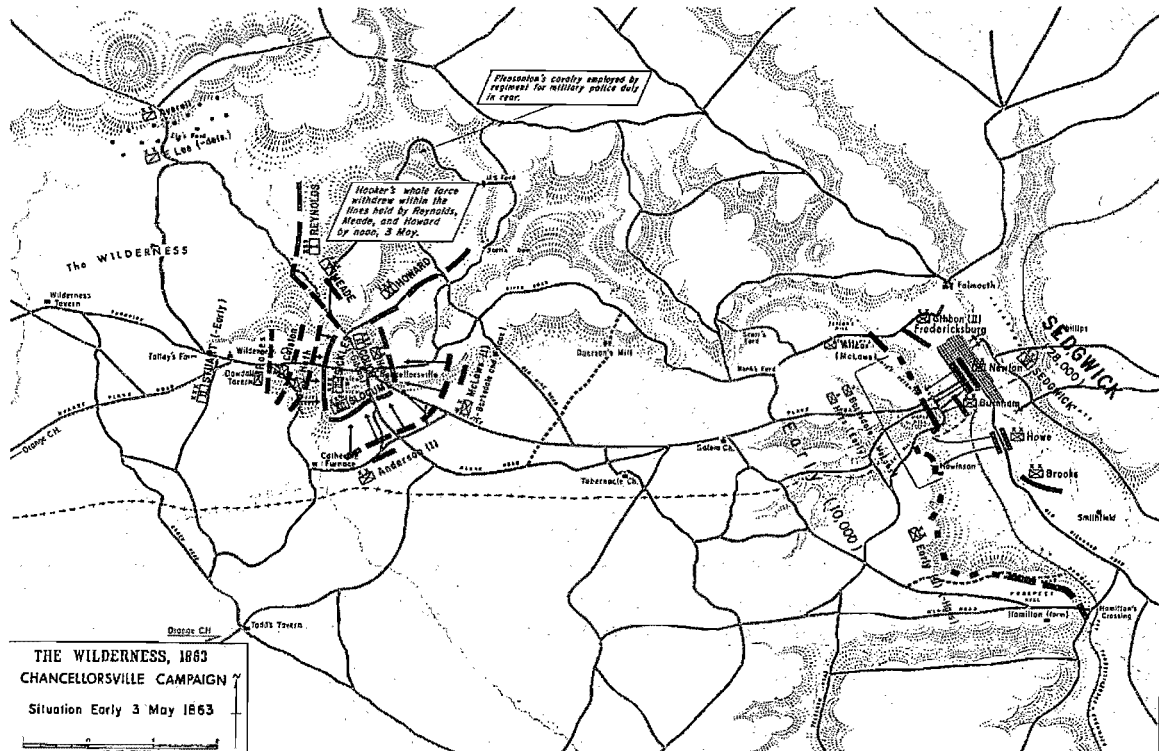
Our discussion has shown that while in war many different roads can lead to the goal, to the attainment of the political object, fighting is the only possible means. Everything is governed by a supreme law, the *decision by force of arms*. If the opponent does seek battle, this recourse can never be denied him. A commander who prefers another strategy must first be sure that his opponent either will not appeal to the supreme tribunal – force – or that he will lose the verdict if he does. To sum up: of all the possible aims in war, the destruction of the enemy's armed forces always appears as the highest.³¹

President Davis' defensive strategy of dispersed troops in fortifications and defensive cordons soon went by the wayside as the Yankees made inroads into the South.

Tennessee River Forts Henry and Donelson fell in early 1862, giving Union forces river access all the way to northern Alabama. The Peninsula Campaign in the spring and early summer of 1862 brought the Union army to within four miles of Richmond. In reality Davis did not and would not have a national military strategy, much less a viable one. No formal war planning directorate ever existed in Richmond. No comprehensive offensive or defensive plan for Confederate armies is found in the historical record.³²

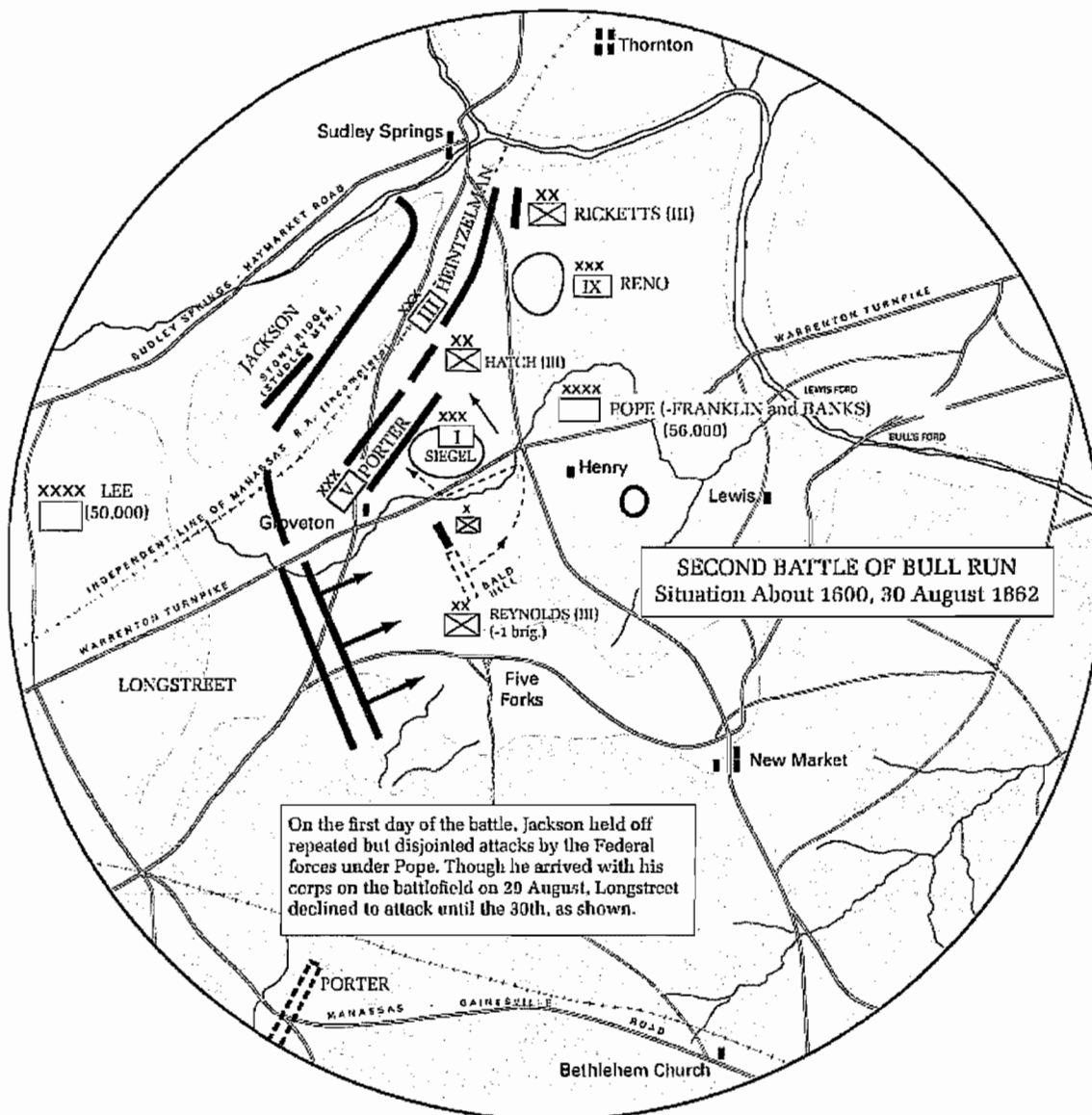
Typically when one thinks of the Confederacy General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia come to mind. Lee's widely applauded Christian humility, bonds through marriage and ancestry to George Washington and other heroes of the American Revolution, and daring maneuvers as a commander struck emotional chords among

fellow Confederates. Honorable, gallant, and audacious, Lee closely fit his people's ideal model of leadership. His army's string of victories afforded tangible proof of southern military prowess and prompted even skeptics to believe it possible to achieve victory and independence. From the surrender of Forts Henry and Donelson in 1862 to the near destruction of the Army of Tennessee in the fall and winter of 1864, a virtually unbroken stream of depressing news reached Confederates from the Western Theater. At the same time, Union naval forces relentlessly tightened the blockade, hopes for European intervention dwindled, and shortages of various material goods plagued the people. The achievements of Lee and his army stood in spectacular contrast to this otherwise dreary picture. The Seven Days, Second Manassas, the invasion of Maryland and capture of Harpers Ferry, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville lifted Confederate spirits and elevated the Army of Northern Virginia and its commander to a position of national admiration and trust.³³ Map B³⁴ illustrates Lee at Chancellorsville. This was one of his greatest victories, and was achieved despite the enemy having vastly superior numbers. Here Lee has Hooker against the river, and has Sedgwick fixed in place at Fredericksburg. Sedgwick would attempt to break out and reach Hooker but would be stopped by additional forces dispatched by Lee. Hooker and Sedgwick would retreat across the river. With superior numbers and a fresh reserve Lee may well have destroyed Hooker.



Map B

Lee's successes resulted in part from an application of Jomini's principles. In one of his victories, Second Manassas, he came as close as any general since Napoleon to duplicating the Napoleonic system of battlefield victory by fixing the enemy in position with a detachment, bringing the rest of the army onto his flank and rear, and then routing him front and flank. Map C³⁵ shows Lee at Second Manassas. Jackson has fixed the enemy's front and Longstreet will crush the Union left flank. Again, Lee did not have the force projection capability necessary to exploit decisively this great victory.



Map C

But it can be argued that Lee was too Napoleonic. Like Napoleon himself, with his passion for climactic, decisive battles of annihilation, Lee destroyed in the end not the enemy's army but his own.³⁶ In regards to the offense and defense that Jomini spoke to, Lee emphasized the offense.³⁷ Due to advances in weaponry and the tactics used during the War Between the States, infantry assaults were very costly, and this was an issue

affected by the South's limited manpower. General Lee was admired and respected by President Davis, and fought the way he did not because of any guidance from Davis, but because that was the way Robert E. Lee knew how to fight, and due to his stature and prowess and because of the trust Davis had in him, Lee was allowed to wage his campaigns with consent from the Confederate President. General Lee fought using General Lee's idea of strategy, not because of any national military strategy approved by Davis. If he had had the numbers enjoyed at times by his opponents he may very well have destroyed his adversary's army in a single climatic battle or succession of battles. Hence the question, why not a national application of Jomini? Jomini's principles were not out of date during the War Between the States – the problem was that there was no national application – no national military strategy – no massed power utilizing the offense and defense along with maneuver to potentially destroy enemy armies when a favorable opportunity appeared. Based on the dispersion of effort in the Confederacy Lee could never get the numbers he needed to enable a decisive outcome.

General Lee was concerned with the Eastern theater of the war, and of the Eastern theater he was primarily concerned with Virginia. Some historians attribute Confederate military defeat to failure in the West, where vast chunks of territory and crucial cities fell to the Yankees.³⁸ They sometimes add that General Lee's unwillingness to send part of his own army to bolster forces beyond the Appalachians may have hastened Confederate defeat. However, it was the Virginia theater that captivated foreign observers. For example, Lee's victories at the Seven Days and Second Manassas in the summer of 1862 conveyed to London and Paris a sense of impending Confederate success. Apparently unimpressed by the string of Union victories in the West extending from Fort Henry to

the fall of New Orleans, Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston and Emperor Napoleon III leaned toward some type of intervention by the first week in September. Northern public opinion also seemed to give greater weight to the Seven Days than to events in the West, much to President Lincoln's chagrin.³⁹

Other evidence of a northern preoccupation with the East abounds. Lincoln visited the Army of the Potomac several times but never favored a western army with his presence. Jefferson Davis joined his western armies on at least three occasions. Senator Charles Sumner revealed a good deal about attitudes among powerful northern politicians when he wrote during the winter of 1865 that Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton thought peace was only obtainable when Lee's army was beaten. Sumner went on to say that as long as Lee and his army remained in the field the war would go on. A telling indication of the public mood was a demand that Grant go east when he became general-in-chief of the Union armies in March of 1864. He could have run the war from Tennessee or Georgia, but the North wanted its best general to bring his talents to bear on the frustrating Virginia theater. Instead of being indifferent to the importance of the West, General Lee may have seen more clearly than any of his peers the best road to Confederate independence. His victories buoyed southern hopes when defeat lay in all other directions, dampened spirits in the North, and impressed European political leaders. They also propelled him to a position where, long before the end of the war, he stood unchallenged as a military hero and his Army of Northern Virginia had become synonymous with the Confederacy in the minds of many southerners. While his army remained in the field there was hope for victory; his surrender extinguished such hope and effectively ended the war. Lee had selected a theater strategy that enabled the

Confederacy to resist for four years and guaranteed that it would not survive the surrender of his army at Appomattox.⁴⁰ One could argue that the Confederacy could lose the war in either the West or the East, but it could win the war only in the East.⁴¹

Davis' deficiencies in strategic thinking revealed themselves in an inability to realize that a systematic evaluation of theater priorities and requisite force needed to destroy a Union army in the field made General Lee's army and area of operations the South's center of gravity and rightful recipient of Confederate national resources. Lee rightly believed that the longer the war the smaller the Confederacy's chances were of winning. The South's best hope of winning the war lay in the Washington-Richmond theater. Considering that the Confederacy was largely unsuccessful in the West anyway it only made sense to give Lee national priority of effort so that he could win his battles and campaigns by more decisive margins than he did and seriously threaten if not capture Washington. Only by winning a Second Manassas or Chancellorsville style of victory in the North and imperiling if not taking Washington could the Confederacy hope to force favorable peace negotiations.⁴²

Another man who had fully absorbed the ideas of Napoleon and Jomini and applied them to the era of telegraph and railroad was General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard.⁴³ Beauregard was born on 28 May 1818, the third of seven children of a southern Louisiana sugar planter. His family was fiercely French, and Beauregard apparently spoke little or no English until he was twelve years old. The occasion for learning English was his going off to boarding school in New York. Yet even there he remained in an atmosphere at least partially French, attending a school kept by two brothers who had served under Napoleon Bonaparte. It was here that he developed a

lifelong fascination with Napoleon and made his decision to follow a military career. Beauregard graduated from West Point second in his 1838 graduating class and remained in the army until resigning his commission in February of 1861 in order to join the Confederacy.⁴⁴ Beauregard opposed Jefferson Davis' policy of dispersing Confederate troops to protect relatively unimportant places and advocated concentrating all of Confederate forces into large armies to meet the Union forces. Beauregard's opinion was that one great victory would be worth more than the occupation of Southern cities by the North. Beauregard had the sound idea, which Lincoln ultimately grasped, that the military objective should be to destroy the army of the enemy.⁴⁵ Beauregard was able to see how the principles exemplified by Napoleon, taught by Jomini, and used by Lee in Virginia could have a Confederacy-wide application through means of the railroad and telegraph.⁴⁶ Beauregard was actually part of an informal association known as the "Western Concentration Bloc." This bloc included other Confederate general officers, including Joseph Johnston and Braxton Bragg. The bloc consisted of factions, but was dominated by two ideas. First, its members rejected what appeared to be a governmental policy of a cordon defense of the West, and they advocated risking the loss of territory in order to secure an offensive concentration of western manpower. Concentration was to be effected upon one of the weakest of the multiple lines of advance used by the western Federals. Second, the Western Concentration Bloc was also motivated by a strong concern for the fate of the central South.⁴⁷ The Western Concentration Bloc had some influence on President Davis, but was hampered by a few factors. One such factor was personal relationships, as Davis did not get along especially well with Beauregard and Joseph Johnston. That Davis was wedded to the departmental system was another factor,

as this inhibited unity of command and strategic use of reserves. Finally, one of the greatest factors was that the Western Concentration Bloc often wanted to draw upon the assets of General Lee's magnificent Army of Northern Virginia. Throughout the war Jefferson Davis failed to assign to any theater and entirely subsidiary role.

Jefferson Davis initially favored a strategy of defense suggestive of General George Washington during the American Revolution. However, by dispersing his forces in an attempt to defend the whole Confederacy he negated this strategic model. General Lee assumed an offensive strategy in the Virginia theater and was successful in winning battles but ultimately could not sustain his casualties and never had enough men to destroy a Union army in the field, which was his intent. Davis applied no national strategic design to military operations except to garrison troops about the Confederacy in the various departments he organized. Wavering between a true application of his Washingtonian strategy and an aggressive strategy such as General Lee's was the worst thing Davis could have done. Indecision offered the worst of any strategic design to include casualties that could not be replaced, loss of territory and logistics, and an enemy that was not destroyed on the field of battle but allowed to reset and reconstitute and continue the fight.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ A. H. McDannald, B.L., ed., *The Modern Concise Encyclopedia*, vol. III, (New York: Unicorn Press, 1941), 490-491.
- ² Harry Hansen, *The Civil War* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1961), 10-11.
- ³ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 854.
- ⁴ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 92-97.
- ⁵ Weigley, 118-119.
- ⁶ University of South Florida, College of Education, Florida Center for Instructional Technology, Educational Technology Clearinghouse, Maps, <http://etc.usf.edu/maps/galleries/us/civilwar/index.php>
- ⁷ Michael S. Trench, "Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis: A Comparison of Commanders in Chief," (Masters Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 1.
- ⁸ Herman Hattaway and Richard E. Beringer, *Jefferson Davis, Confederate President* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 1.
- ⁹ Trench, 10.
- ¹⁰ Clement Eaton, *Jefferson Davis* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 5-8.
- ¹¹ Trench, 11-12.
- ¹² Hattaway and Beringer, 3-6.
- ¹³ Trench, 13-14.
- ¹⁴ Eaton, 66.
- ¹⁵ Trench, 15-17.
- ¹⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Everyman's Library, 1993), 146.
- ¹⁷ Clausewitz, 130.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Lawrence Connelly and Archer Jones, *The Politics of Command: Factions and Ideas in Confederate Strategy* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 3.
- ¹⁹ Archer Jones, "Military Means, Political Ends: Strategy," in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt, 43-77 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50-51.
- ²⁰ Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. Capt. G. H. Mendell and Lieut. W. P. Craighill (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 69.
- ²¹ Jomini, 48.
- ²² Jomini, 70.
- ²³ Jomini, 184-185.
- ²⁴ McPherson, 331.
- ²⁵ Eaton, 243.
- ²⁶ Reid Mitchell, "The Perseverance of the Soldiers," in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt, 109-132 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 112.
- ²⁷ Weigley, 96-97.
- ²⁸ Connelly and Jones, 88-90.
- ²⁹ Connelly and Jones, 88.
- ³⁰ Clausewitz, 110.
- ³¹ Clausewitz, 113.
- ³² Robert G. Tanner, *Retreat to Victory? Confederate Strategy Reconsidered* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2001), 2.
- ³³ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 86.
- ³⁴ United States Military Academy, The History Department, Department Maps, http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlas/american_civil_war/JPG/ACW29.jpg
- ³⁵ United States Military Academy, The History Department, Department Maps, http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlas/american_civil_war/ACWGIF/ACW12CentrevilleInset.gif
- ³⁶ Weigley, 127.
- ³⁷ Gallagher, 116.

³⁸ Gary W. Gallagher, "Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests: Generals," in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt, 79-108 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 99. See Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990), xi-xii, where Woodworth asserts that the war was not decided in the East but in the West, and that the truly decisive battles were fought in the West.

³⁹ Gary W. Gallagher, "Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests: Generals," in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt, 79-108 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 99.

⁴⁰ Gary W. Gallagher, "Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests: Generals," in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt, 79-108 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 98-100.

⁴¹ Gary W. Gallagher, "Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests: Generals," in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt, 79-108 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 104.

⁴² Russell F. Weigley, *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), XXI.

⁴³ Connelly and Jones, xii.

⁴⁴ Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 72-75.

⁴⁵ Eaton, 244.

⁴⁶ Connelly and Jones, 122.

⁴⁷ Connelly and Jones, 52-54.

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